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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines basic objectives for multicultural and intergroup relations education at the elementary level. The reduction of stereotypic and prejudicial thinking and overt discriminatory behavior on the part of both children and teachers is presented as the overall goal. Several specific objectives listed focus on self concept, ethnic awareness, and participation in educational and social life. The paper then discusses the process of multicultural education and the benefits it can provide for both students and society. (APM)

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CONCEPTS IN MULTICULTURAL AND INTERGROUP RELATIONS EDUCATION

by Major Morris

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Concepts in Multicultural and Intergroup Relations Education

Major Morris

A strong component of the rationale for a Multicultural and Intergroup Relations Experiences (IRC) is the truth that children are aware at an early age of similarities and differences that exist among them based on their individual physical appearances and behavior. Little children surely can observe differences in skin colorings; red hair, blonde hair, black hair; freckled faces and unblemished skin; buck teeth, straight teeth and braced teeth. This list could, or course, go on and on. Beyond the individual differences they are aware also of cultural, ethnic, and racial differences; the kinds of food and music that they learn to like at home are not similar in many instances; there are some children who go to worship on Sundays and some who go on Saturdays and some who don't go at all to worship. These variations of group behavior and individual differences are very much apparent to young people.

It is safe to say that, at an early age - perhaps up through grade six - these differences do not make a difference to children in their everyday lives. But it is the sad truth that, in their homes, in their places of worship, and too often, in the schools, young people begin to learn things about these diversities, and the things that they learn, more often than not, are of a negative nature. The difficulties that our society continues to have in relating positively across racial and ethnic lines attests to this.

Exercises in Intergroup Relations

Intergroup relations experiences in the classroom can help students to give thoughtful consideration to all kinds of relations involving "me", "we", "he", "she", and, "they" - and to develop an understanding of these relations - seeking to advance student pride in the "me" and the "we". These kinds of experiences can also convey knowledge and develop feeling by the student that the behavior of a "he" or a "they" too often is misjudged because it is prejudged. Reducing stereotypic and prejudicial thinking and overt discriminatory behavior towards others by child and teacher alike should be the intertwined objectives of intergroup relations exercises. Let me suggest some specific objectives for students which can be the foci of this process.

OBJECTIVES

1. To advance the child's positive self-concept.
2. To help the child to reduce stereotypic and prejudicial thinking and overt discrimination with respect to all kinds of groupings of human beings.
3. To assist the child in realizing that there are many differences among people within groupings or categories of people based on sex, age, race, ethnic classification, national origin, profession or employment, region (e.g. "Southerner," "New Englander"), and level of education.
4. To give the child a very realistic understanding of the past and the present, including the many contributions to the development of America by people from a wide variety of groupings and nations.

5. To encourage the child to be an active participant in the teaching-learning process in the school.
6. To suggest ways by which all individuals may contribute toward bringing the realities of the democratic civic culture closer to its ideals.

These objectives require little explanation. Positive self-concept is fundamental for all children. We would hope to help young people to be less stereotypic in judgement of groups different from them and to understand that it is wrong to judge people on the basis of group identifications. Thus it is essential that young people should realize how many differences there are among people in any kind of grouping. The fourth objective stresses the richness of diversity in the development of America (the United States). A corollary of this objective is the generation of pride by the student in what members of his group have given to this nation (e.g. Italians, Chinese, Blacks, and many others). Participatory activity in the classroom is emphasized in the fifth objective, especially the processes of role playing, discovery, inquiry, and gaming. Finally, the sixth objective attempts to relate participation in the teaching-learning process to the ideal of being an active and effective participant in the society at large. Of particular importance is that participatory activity which earnestly seeks to move the realities of the "here and now" of life in our society toward such noble goals as equal rights and opportunities, and "liberty and justice for all".

My remarks thus far have been concerned mainly with elementary school aged children - up through grade six. But, after the sixth grade -- what? What kinds of positive, cultural growth experiences are being provided for young people marching into adolescence and the trauma of the cultural shock that engulfs them in this new, alien environment.

Given the ideal, multicultural and intergroup relations experiences in their classrooms will have provided all elementary children with a rich, positive self and group concept; they will have learned to function in a democratic environment; they will have learned to live and function well with the least amount of friction with their classmates based on their cultural differences. But then, they are taken suddenly away from the relative security of their neighborhood school -- all the familiar faces, adult and children -- the family-like atmosphere of a good elementary classroom - they are taken from this and plunked unprepared into the ofttimes unfriendly, completely strange world of the junior high or middle school; new adult faces -- many new children -- mostly different from the children in the old neighborhood school. Add to that the completely foreign learning environment; a separate teacher for every discipline, limited spaces of time in a given classroom with new people at every stop. Consider the imposition of artificial changes being imposed at the same time that nature is introducing new phases of the psychological and physiological changes that are an inevitable part of the young persons growth and development. There are, of course, new social pressures: competition, acceptability, survival. It can truly be a period of extreme cultural shock for the adolescent.

What are the ramifications of all these physical, social and emotional conditions with which a youngster has to learn to live and to perform in? There are many, of course. But the concern that I am addressing myself to here is the tendency, when seeking new social alignments, to fall back on the immediate security of ethnic, cultural, and racial groupings. This is not to suggest that group identification is undesirable. On the contrary, positive group identification and cultural sharing have been our goals for young people from the beginning. I am suggesting that, in a stress situation, without some continued positive intergroup relations follow-up at the level in which they are functioning, there is too often a tendency for these group identifications and associations to take on negative characteristics as they relate to groups that are different. The heightened competitive environment in which young people find themselves at this juncture of their lives ofttimes breeds hostile rather than congenial intergroup relations. The forming of cliques around economic status, athletic memberships...these kinds of alliances, too often tend to pit one group of youths against another. Young people who do not belong to any of these social orders find themselves falling into ethnic and racial alignments for identification and security. And, again, too often the interaction among and between these groups is filled with friction.

How can schools and teachers help to provide buffers against the cultural shock that young people are sure to experience upon making the transition from grade school to the more advance stages of the learning process? How can teachers be sensitized to the need

for intergroup experiences? Some answers could be found in much of what already has transpired at this conference. It is my hope that the presentations you will hear at this session and the dialogue that will result, hopefully, between us panelists and you - will produce some viable initiatives for broad program enrichment in the area of multicultural and intergroup relations education for students of all ages - thereby forestalling many of the conflicts and hostilities that surface and occupy too much of the time and energies of all of us.